

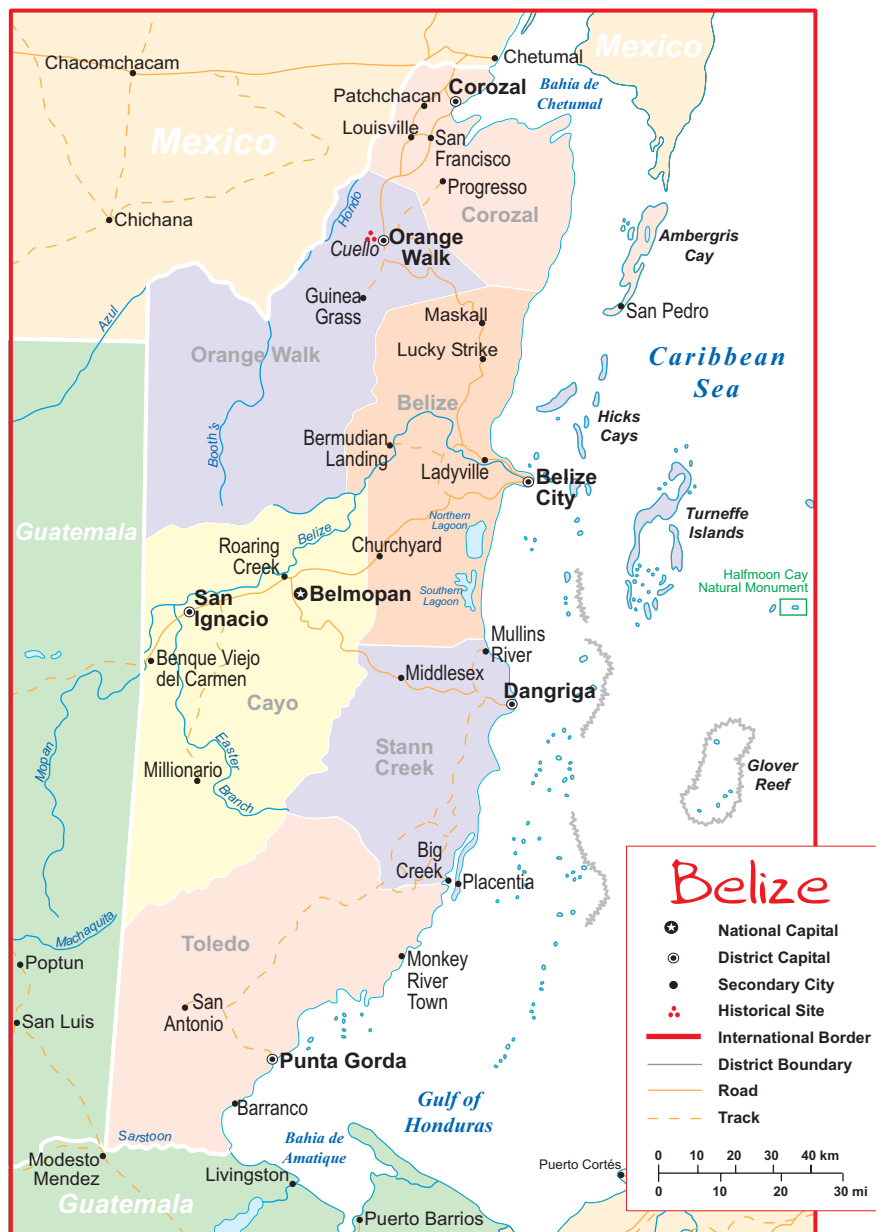
# Drug Intelligence Brief



DRUG ENFORCEMENT ADMINISTRATION  
INTELLIGENCE DIVISION

March 2004  
DEA-03078

## BELIZE: COUNTRY BRIEF 2003



**Drug Enforcement  
Administration (DEA)  
Office Responsible:**

Belize Country Office

**Type of Government:**

Parliamentary Democracy with Elected Prime Minister

**Area:**

22,965 square kilometers (8,867 square miles)

**Capital:**

Belmopan

**Population:**

266,440 (July 2003 Estimate)

## Belize Government Officials

<b>Prime Minister:</b>	Said Musa
<b>Deputy Prime Minister:</b>	Johnny Briceño
<b>Official Head of State:</b>	HM Queen Elizabeth II
<b>Governor-General:</b>	Sir Colville N. Young, Sr.

## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

In 1981, the United Kingdom granted independence to Belize (formerly British Honduras), which had been a British colony since 1862. Guatemala, however, refused to recognize Belize as a new nation because Guatemala considered Belize to be part of its territory. It was not until 1992 that Guatemala recognized Belize's independence, and diplomatic relations were established between the two countries. Nonetheless, border dispute incidents, involving confrontations between Guatemalan citizens and Belize security forces, continued to be an issue until 2000, when both countries agreed to respect an "adjacency line" that extended 1 kilometer east and west of the border.

Belize is unique among the Central American countries because of its very small population and its history of British colonization. Queen Elizabeth II is the formal head of state, although Belize has its own elected parliament. English is the official language, but Spanish is the native tongue of about 50 percent of the people, and it is spoken as a second language by another 20 percent. Most Belizeans are of multiracial descent, with nearly half of the population consisting of mixed Mayan and European descent.

Tourism has long been the mainstay of the Belizean economy. Agricultural products, such as sugar cane, citrus fruits and bananas, also serve as important sources of foreign exchange. Nevertheless, Belize remains plagued by a number of social problems: high unemployment, poverty (over a third of its population live below the poverty line), a growing involvement in the drug trade, increased gang activity, and rising urban crime.

## OVERVIEW

Belize borders Mexico to the north, Guatemala to the west, and the Caribbean Sea to the east. It is a transit country for the movement of drugs, particularly cocaine, from South America to the United States. The geography of Belize and its proximity to Mexico make Belize an ideal transshipment point for drugs destined for the United States. Belize's vulnerability is exacerbated by the country's minimal security forces and poorly guarded land and sea borders. Air and maritime trafficking are the primary methods of cocaine smuggling for Belizean, Mexican, and Colombian organizations operating along the Belizean coast. Drug traffickers also use the western region of Belize to smuggle cocaine and marijuana from neighboring Guatemala into Belize for onward transshipment to Mexico.

## Drug Seizures in Belize 1998 - 2003

	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003
<b>Cocaine (kilograms)</b>	40	37	14	3,850	10	56.7
<b>Marijuana (kilograms)</b>	1,557	392	249	245	330	55
<b>Cannabis Plants Eradicated</b>	202,803	270,136	162,975	110,000	45,772	103,058
<b>Arrests</b>	1,743	2,369	2,179	2,000	2,000	473

*Source:* International Narcotics Control Strategy Report, U.S. Department of State

Belizean drug traffickers operate along Glover Reef and South Water Cay, which are located in southern Belizean waters, and store drug shipments on Ambergris Cay, located near Chetumal, Mexico. Increased smuggling activity in the western Caribbean is reflected in the recent 1-metric-ton cocaine seizure from a “go-fast” boat in May 2003, by the U.S. Coast Guard and the Belize Anti-Drug Unit (ADU). Traffickers use maritime operations in conjunction with aircraft “wet drops” (dropping packages of cocaine from a flying aircraft into the water) to smuggle drug shipments into Belizean waters. Cocaine, air dropped off the coast of Belize, is transported by small go-fast boats to the Belizean mainland or Mexico, where it is stored, then shipped onward to the United States.

Recent intelligence suggests that traffickers also use aircraft to transport drugs into Belize. These aircraft land in northern Belize, close to the Mexican border, where the drugs are offloaded and moved overland into Mexico. For example, three deserted aircraft suspected of smuggling large cocaine loads from South America were discovered in Belize in the later half of 2003.

## CULTIVATION AND PRODUCTION

The only illicit drug grown in Belize is cannabis. The growing areas tend to be small in size and are intermittent throughout the country. Illicit cultivation continues to occur at reduced levels from the widespread cultivation of a decade ago. Cannabis cultivation traditionally occurs in the northern Orange Walk District, and fields typically range from 500 to several thousand plants. Additionally, the Belize Defense Force (BDF) has located numerous small plantings of cannabis along the Guatemalan border. Growers often plant cannabis in remote locations and abandon the plants until harvest time, thus avoiding the risk of being arrested during eradication programs. To avoid aerial detection, cultivators often interplant young cannabis seedlings with corn plants, or use the “underbrush” method. The underbrush method involves removing small trees and bushes, but leaving taller ones in place to hide the cannabis plants from aerial detection.

Because of environmental concerns, the Government of Belize does not permit aerial spraying as a method for cannabis eradication. However, the Government of Belize continues to cooperate and encourage aerial reconnaissance missions. The police and the BDF follow up on these missions by manually eradicating cannabis fields and seedlings. The Government of Belize views this eradication method as more effective

and more environmentally sound than spraying. Cannabis is cultivated on a much smaller scale now than it was in the early 1980s, when the country ranked fourth in the worldwide production of marijuana. In 1983, for example, the Government of Belize eradicated almost 6 million cannabis plants. Since 1999, cannabis eradication has steadily dropped from a little over 270,000 plants in 1999 to less than 46,000 plants in 2002. From October 2002 through February 2003, the BDF conducted cannabis eradication in the northern part of the country, seizing 21,230 cannabis plants and 4,400 seedlings. Currently, there are no indications that cannabis cultivated in Belize significantly impacts the United States, as cannabis in Belize is primarily grown for local consumption.

## CHEMICALS AND PROCESSING

There is no significant traffic through Belize of essential or precursor chemicals that are used in the production of cocaine. Furthermore, there are no legitimate industries in Belize that require the use of precursor chemicals.

The production of MDMA has been traced to Belize since the early 1990s, and it is believed that only a small amount of MDMA is produced there. In November 2001, Belizean police found and shut down its first illicit drug laboratory, and arrested several individuals. The seizure of this MDMA laboratory was of concern to the Belizean

Government because, prior to this seizure, there had been no indication of drug production in Belize. The Government of Belize, in support of the United Nations Convention on Psychotropic Drugs, has since developed a precursor chemical control program.

### An MDMA Laboratory Seizure

In November 2001, the Corozal Police Department and the Anti-Drug Unit of the DEA Belize City Country Office (BCCO) raided a clandestine laboratory at the Ranchito Village in the Corozal District of Belize. Four individuals, including the U.S. citizen chemist who manufactured the MDMA, were arrested. Initial statements made by a cooperating defendant indicated that the laboratory had been in operation for several years. Roughly 11 kilograms of powdered MDMA were produced in this laboratory biannually. After processing in Belize, the MDMA powder was smuggled to Mexico to be pressed into tablets. Given a potential yield of approximately 10,000 MDMA tablets from 1 kilogram of powder, the 11 kilograms of MDMA powder could have yielded over 100,000 tablets with an estimated street value of over US\$3 million.

## DRUG TRAFFICKING TRENDS

Belize is a transit country primarily for cocaine and South American heroin en route to consumers in the United States. Belize is a natural transshipment location for illicit drugs because of its contiguous borders with Guatemala and Mexico, its long unprotected coastline, its hundreds of cays, and its rudimentary infrastructure. Multihundred-kilogram quantities of cocaine enter Belize via the coast, transported

from Colombia either by go-fast boats or by airplanes that airdrop the cocaine into the vicinity of the cays for subsequent recovery by go-fast boats. Aircraft originating from South and Central America use Belize as an intermediate stop for refueling or as a staging location for further transport north. The majority of cocaine is moved to Mexico either by vehicle or by aircraft. Drug couriers smuggle the remainder of the cocaine out of the country on commercial aircraft that depart from the Phillip Goldson International Airport in Belize City, or on large cruise ships that visit the country. Mexican drug trafficking organizations dominate the drug trade in Belize and Belizean drug traffickers merely provide logistical support and security. Although Belize is not currently considered a major transit country for drugs en route to the United States, it continues to be a country of concern due to its strategic location.

Go-fast boats are the preferred maritime conveyance used by drug trafficking organizations to transport cocaine through Belizean waters. These boats originate in Colombia (frequently from San Andres Island) or other Central American countries, and transport cocaine north into Belizean waters, usually at night. Go-fast boats are refueled or unloaded by support teams that choose a different location for each operation. Drug traffickers in Belize are known to rotate their operations from the northern districts to the southern districts in order to avoid detection. In the southern districts, traffickers use maritime transshipments (moving cocaine from large Caribbean ports in Honduras and Guatemala into Punta Gorda) and, in the north, they use the Ambergris Cay area for aircraft and maritime operations. Maritime operations are used in conjunction with “wet drops” from aircraft or off-loads from sea vessels. Support groups provide fuel, boats, safe-houses, and alternate transportation for Colombian go-fast boats. Loads of cocaine from larger Colombian go-fast boats are sometimes transferred to smaller go-fast boats in Belizean waters for transport to the Belize mainland, or transshipment on to Guatemala or Mexico.

Recent drug smuggling activity has indicated an increase in the use of small and medium-sized aircraft to transport cocaine into Belize from Colombia. The aircraft land in northern Belize, near the Mexican border, to either refuel or unload the drugs. If the drugs are unloaded in Belize, they are then transported overland into Mexico or stored in a safe-house for transportation at a later date.

- ♦ On February 26, 2003, agents from the BCCO and local authorities traveled to the Orange Walk District, and located a suspect aircraft that had been reported to the BCCO on the previous day. The aircraft appeared to have landed; to have been pushed off the road, which had been used as a landing strip; and to have been set on fire. Although no drugs were found, Belizean authorities estimated the aircraft was capable of transporting as much as 1.6 metric tons of cocaine.
- ♦ On August 29, 2003, an Antonov 26 B cargo aircraft was seized by Belizean enforcement authorities in Blue Creek, approximately 1½ miles from Quintana Roo, Mexico. After landing, the aircraft's landing gear became stuck in the mud and it was unable to take off. Before the aircraft was abandoned, several individuals arrived at the landing site, and picked up the crew and 10 bales of suspected cocaine, and departed for Mexico.

Drug traffickers smuggle cocaine to Mexico through Belize and neighboring Guatemala via containerized cargo, using both trucks and maritime shipping. Belize

has two seaports, Belize City and Dangriga, which are capable of berthing container shipments. Drug traffickers commonly conceal cocaine in fresh fruit and seafood, which are both major exports from Belize. Vessels, transporting perishable food, are rarely checked thoroughly by customs, as the inspectors can be held fiscally responsible for lost or spoiled cargo if no drugs are found.

Most of the cocaine transported overland to, or through, Belize is hidden in containers or concealed in bulk commercial shipments, such as lumber or concrete. Cocaine smuggled into Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador via maritime vessels is sometimes shipped overland to Belize or Mexico en route to the United States. The majority of overland smuggling operations into Belize and Mexico use secondary border crossings in the Peten Region of Guatemala. Besides the formal border crossings, there are numerous dirt roads, which are accessible by four-wheel-drive vehicles, that cross the border. The Peten Region is heavily forested along both sides of the Guatemalan–Belizean border, and provides traffickers with a large area for both cannabis cultivation and smuggling operations.

Of particular note, the significant increase in heroin smuggling and seizure activity that is occurring in most of Central America has not yet occurred in Belize; however, what heroin is smuggled through the international airport in Belize City is destined for the United States, primarily Chicago, Illinois.

### ***Significant Seizures***

- ♦ In May 2001, 1,158 kilograms of cocaine were uncovered in 19 sacks buried on the property of a suspected drug trafficker. The cocaine had been delivered to Belizean waters by Colombian go-fast boats late at night on May 6, 2001. The suspect had rented two vessels to meet the go-fast boats and take delivery of the cocaine. The suspect stated that half the load had already been smuggled into Mexico.
- ♦ In September 2001, 1,048 kilograms of cocaine were seized when the crew beached a Colombian go-fast boat, with three outboard motors, in an attempt to avoid apprehension. The four crew members escaped, but the Belize police seized 43 bales, each containing approximately 20 kilograms of cocaine.
- ♦ In October 2001, 1,532 kilograms of cocaine were seized when the Belizean police searched an apartment following a traffic violation. The suspect was recognized by the local authorities as a member of a well-known Mexican drug organization. Based on the suspicious behavior exhibited by the suspect, the local authorities searched one of his residences and discovered the cocaine.
- ♦ In May 2003, 1,088 kilograms of cocaine were seized from a go-fast boat that had traveled near the Belizean coastline. After being notified by the BCCO, local law enforcement authorities intercepted a suspect go-fast boat. The boat's crew began jettisoning their cargo when they realized that they had been detected. A total of 40 bales of cocaine—38 by U.S. authorities and 2 by the local Belize ADU—were retrieved from the water. A BDF aircraft attempted to locate the go-fast boat, but was unsuccessful.



## DRUG ABUSE

The Government of Belize considers crack cocaine abuse to be the most significant domestic drug problem because of the associated criminal activities that accompany crack use. International cocaine traffickers pay their Belizean counterparts in cocaine, which local trafficking organizations convert to crack for sale in Belize City and other urban areas. Much of this crack cocaine is directly associated with organized gangs, who distribute crack cocaine throughout the country.

Demand reduction began in 1989 and is coordinated by the National Drug Abuse Control Council (NDACC). The NDACC works in close collaboration with communities to provide drug abuse education, information, counseling, rehabilitation, and outreach. The NDACC developed the nation's first comprehensive drug control strategy with the help of the Organization of American States and the European Union.

## MONEY LAUNDERING

Belize is not considered an important regional financial center, but is striving to establish offshore banking, which has opened the country to potential money laundering. Belize is a minor player in international offshore financial services because of its late entry into the financial sector.

The Offshore Banking Act and the Money Laundering Prevention Act were finalized in August 1996. The Offshore Banking Act followed several laws that began building an offshore services sector in Belize, starting with the passage of the International Business Companies Act in 1990 and the Trusts Act in 1992.

In June 1996, Belize passed its first Money Laundering Prevention Law, which was implemented in August 1996. The law applies to individuals and institutions, including banks and offshore banks that assist and collaborate in money laundering activity. Banks and other financial institutions are required under the law to keep records of all financial transactions for a period of 5 years, and to open these records for inspection. Institutions that fail to comply with the new law could have their licenses revoked and also would be subject to a fine of up to US\$50,000. Penalties include fines beginning at US\$25,000 and confiscation of property from individuals and organizations violating the law. Penalties also include jail sentences for periods of not less than 3 years. Offenses covered by the law include blackmail, counterfeiting, drug trafficking and related offenses, extortion, false accounting, forgery, fraud, illegal deposit taking, robbery, and theft involving more than US\$10,000.

The Financial Intelligence Unit (FIU) was established in Belize in September 2002. The FIU is a Belizean Government agency and financial institutions in that country are to report suspect transactions to this agency. The intelligence unit analyzes those transactions and, if deemed suspicious, the investigative section is tasked to investigate and report their findings to the director of the agency.

## COUNTERDRUG ENFORCEMENT

The Government of Belize recognizes the country's geographic vulnerability to smugglers and is working to combat drug trafficking, primarily through the BDF and the Belize Police Department (BPD), which has approximately 900 police officers, in addition to 36 Tourism Police. The Tourism Police have no arrest authority, but have been beneficial in reducing petty crimes against tourists. The Government of Belize has slightly increased the number of new cadets admitted to the police force. In addition to the usual qualifications, secondary education and job experience are now qualities that are sought in new cadets.

The BPD has several specialized units. The Violent Intelligence Unit (VIU) was abolished 2 years ago and was supplanted by the Criminal Intelligence Unit (CIU). The CIU focuses primarily on intelligence and the apprehension of repeat offenders and violent criminals. The ADU of the BPD which consists of 35 officers, focuses solely on drug interdiction and the apprehension of drug offenders. The BPD also coordinates the Joint Information Collection Center (JICC). The JICC program is a joint endeavor of the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of International Narcotics Control and Law Enforcement Affairs (INL) and the DEA, which establishes drug intelligence centers in host countries. The program encourages interagency cooperation in the collection, analysis, and dissemination of drug information.

In 2002, the Government of Belize acknowledged drug trafficking as a serious threat, and increased the size of the ADU from 23 to 33 vetted members. The ADU is dedicated solely to handling drugs cases, and conducts operations throughout the year. In addition, the Government of Belize has authorized the on-site collaboration of the DEA with the Counter-Narcotics ADU. The DEA is the only U.S. law enforcement agency that collaborates with the ADU.

The Government of Belize has participated, and continues to participate in joint antidrug operations with U.S. law enforcement officials. These joint operations include Operation ATLANTICO and Operation ALLIED STRENGTH/OCEAN GARDEN, a cooperative U.S.-British-Belizean counterdrug operation, and regular manual eradication missions. Furthermore, the Government of Belize conducts independent counterdrug operations and participates in regional antidrug initiatives.

## LEGISLATION, TREATIES, AND CONVENTIONS

Belize signed a maritime counterdrug agreement with the United States in 1992, which provides for a shiprider program. In September 1997, the Government of Belize signed the National Crime Information Center Pilot Project Assessment Agreement, which allows for the sharing of information and data between the United States and Belize. An overflight protocol was added to the 1992 maritime agreement and signed in April 2000. In addition, a new extradition treaty was signed in March 2000, and a Mutual Legal Assistance treaty was signed in September 2000. Lastly, a stolen vehicle treaty between Belize and the United States entered into force on August 16, 2002.



Since 2000, the Government of Belize had worked with the Caribbean Financial Action Task Force (CFATF) in an effort to thwart money laundering in Belize. Belize joined 19 other Caribbean and Central American countries in signing a memorandum of understanding on the prevention and control of money laundering, which formalized Belize's membership in the CFATF.

Belize has extradited Belizean nationals under the 2000 U.S.–Belizean treaty. During 2002, Belize extradited one suspect, and, in early 2003, two Belizean nationals were extradited to the United States under the 2000 treaty for drug crimes.

## CONCLUSIONS AND PROJECTIONS

The Police Anti-Drug Unit is dedicated solely to handling drug cases and conducts enforcement operations throughout the year. In 2003, nearly 473 drug-related arrests were made, stemming from possession and trafficking of marijuana, cocaine, crack cocaine, and heroin. Though still building their capability, the Government of Belize continues to dedicate resources to pursuing major maritime interdiction efforts. In addition, efforts to eradicate cannabis appear to be successful, as the number of hectares reportedly under cultivation has been significantly reduced.

Belize is one of two countries in Central America that shares a land border with Mexico. Increased legitimate commercial traffic between Belize and Mexico will continue to facilitate cross-border drug smuggling. As maritime smuggling in the western Caribbean increases, Belize may become a more frequent transshipment location for cocaine destined for the U.S. markets.

Support from the current government in Belize for international cooperation in cocaine interdiction and cannabis eradication appears to be strong. The government's ability to follow through with their stated commitment will be critical in the prevention of Belize from becoming a more important smuggling route for traffickers.

This report was prepared by the Mexico/Central America Strategic Intelligence Unit, Regional Strategic Intelligence Section, of the Office of Strategic Intelligence. This report reflects information received prior to October 2003. Comments and requests for copies are welcome and may be faxed to the Intelligence Production Unit, Intelligence Division, DEA Headquarters, at (202) 307-8726.